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Résumé de l'article

Tout en soulignant l'importance de la présence marxiste dans l'historiographie britannique, l'auteur trace ici un tableau de ce qui s'est fait dans la dernière décennie tant en histoire sociale qu'en histoire du travail dans le Royaume-Uni. Avant 1960, de dire l'auteur, l'historiographie britannique était, pour une large part, le travail de trois illustres associations : celles des Webb, des Hammond et des Cole. Cependant, il existait également une camaraderie dont la grande importance ne devint entièrement apparente qu'après sa dissolution en 1956, soit celle du groupe des historiens du Parti communiste.

Selon lui, cette camaraderie constitue un point de repère crucial si l'on veut comprendre l'ascendance singulière du marxisme en Grande-Bretagne — un marxisme qui toutefois ne peut d'aucune façon définir sa propre identité —; de plus, c'est également un point de départ tout indiqué si l'on veut saisir toute la question du professionnalisme et de l'anti-professionnalisme qui préoccupe les historiens de l'histoire sociale et du mouvement ouvrier depuis les années 1970 — une question qui soulève des problèmes fondamentaux quant à la nature de la vocation de l'historien.

DISTINGUISHED HISTORIAN'S ADDRESS

The Last Ten Years in British Labour Historiography

ROYDEN HARRISON

I count it a great honour to be invited to address your annual conference. The British Historical Association held its conference a couple of months ago. We assembled in one of our newer universities which has a name which presents North Americans with certain difficulties — the University of Loughborough. An American scientist who was invited to lecture there began by remarking: "Vice Chancellor, esteemed colleagues, this is the first time I have been to the University of Low-Brow."

At our conference, the presidential address was delivered by Professor Ralph Davis. His subject was "The Content of History". He considered how the preoccupations of historians had changed since his undergraduate days before the war. He concluded that it was the rise of social history in general and the unremitting effort to recover the lost experience of peasants and proletarians in particular which constituted the biggest single change. I found our president's paper admirable. However, I found one of its associations highly ironical. Ralph Davis is the son of H.W.C. Davis who was Regius Professor of History at Oxford. Speaking in 1925, the Regius Professor had cautioned his audience against those whom he described as "self-styled social historians. People who tell us that what we most need to know about any civilisation in the past is what its poorer and more illiterate members thought and did. . . . our common humanity is best studied in the most eminent examples that it has produced of every type of human excellence".[1]

There are still some scholars who attempt to write English history with the English people left out, but they are a greatly diminished band. On the other side, with every year since 1945, the production of books and articles dealing with social and labour history has enormously increased. M.W. Flinn and T.C. Smout's *Essays in Social History* (Oxford 1974) brings together twelve contributors of whom eight or nine are clearly identifying themselves with labour history or writing labour history. You invited me to concentrate on what has been going on during the last ten years. Well, ladies and gentlemen, within that period 3,313 books and substantial articles were published in the area of British labour history. This amounts to almost one a day — allowing for the observance of the Sabbath.[2] When the Regius Professor was laying down the law, you could have counted the number of "self-styled social historians" on the figures of both hands. As for

1. R. Blackburn, ed., *Ideology in Social Science* (1972), p. 98. Place of publication is London unless otherwise stated.

self-styled labour historians, one hand would have been enough if you made the Webbs, the Hammonds, and the Coles stand for one each. Today labour historians have their own quasi-professional association, with over one thousand members in Britain, aside from those who reside in thirty-two other countries. Not content with this, the labour historians in Scotland, Ireland, and Wales have their own societies. During the last ten years, seven regional labour history societies have been set up in different parts of England. Then there is an oral history society which is largely concerned with labour history. As for documentary sources, not only have existing repositories such as the famous library at the London School of Economics been considerably enriched by the acquisition of such important records as those of the Independent Labour Party, but entire new institutions have been founded within the last ten years. Thus, the Modern Record Centre was established at the University of Warwick in 1973 with the help of a generous grant from the Leverhulme Foundation. Its highly professional staff set out to identify situations in which labour records would be at risk, for instance, when unions amalgamate or where reorganisation follows changes in parliamentary or local boundaries. By offering to house and catalogue such papers if they are deposited on permanent loan, the MRC has acquired virtually all the remaining primary source material relating to printers, engineers, builders, and transport workers, much of it going back to the early nineteenth century. In addition, it has a substantial collection relating to the white collar workers. On top of that — and this may prove to be of the greatest moment — it recently secured all the records of all the national employers associations which preceeded the present Confederation of British Industry.[3] The foundation of the MRC has helped to change the attitudes of County Record Offices and perhaps the Public Record Office by persuading them that there are historical records even when they do not relate to landed society and even if they originated after the end of the eighteenth century.

It was during the 1970s that we saw the opening of a National Museum of Labour History in London and the Library of the Working Class Movement in Manchester, as well as the production of a catalogue in Scotland which set out to do nothing less than to list, classify, and describe all the primary source material relating to Scottish labour with its location inside and outside that country.[4] I know of no comparable enterprise anywhere in the world, although one of the English regional societies is embarking upon one at the moment.

In 1977 there appeared the *Warwick Guide to British Labour Periodicals*, a check list of over four thousand journals produced between 1790 and 1970. The *Guide* is heavily indexed, supplies locations, and most items are followed by a

2. This figure is arrived at on the basis of the bibliographies which appear in the spring issues of the *Bulletin* of the Society for the Study of Labour History (hereafter referred to as *Bulletin*). Founded in 1960, the *Bulletin* is co-edited by R. Harrison and J. Halstead, Centre for the Study of Social History, University of Warwick, Coventry, CV4 7AL.
3. R. Storey, *Guide to the Modern Records Centre* (Warwick, 1977).
4. I. MacDougall, *A catalogue of some labour records in Scotland and some Scots records outside Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1977).

brief descriptive note.[5] But the biggest event, at this level, in the last ten years has been the appearance of the first five volumes of the *Dictionary of Labour Biography*. This is nothing less than the labour historians equivalent to the famous *Dictionary of National Biography* established in the nineteenth century by Leslie Stephen. As you probably know, the *DNB* is almost entirely devoted to the Great and the Good, the High and the Mighty and the Grave and the Earnest with an occasional concession to the Gay and the Splendid. Labour leaders receive little attention. This is now being corrected by Joyce Bellamy and John Saville whose aim is nothing less than to supply biographical notices of everybody who has ever been a labour leader at local as well as national level. Moreover, it is highly characteristic that this work is not just as professional, as technically excellent, as the *DNB* itself, but that it is better! For example, each volume contains a subject index while at appropriate points classified bibliographies have been introduced which guide the user to the literature relating to particular institutions or movements with which the subject of the biographical entry was particularly involved.[6]

The shade of the Regius Professor would hardly have approved of this extravagant attention to "the poorer or more illiterate members of society". But he would surely have been brought to a grudging admiration of the way in which all the familiar paraphernalia of scholarship — the concentration upon archives, the production of catalogues, guides and dictionaries — has proceeded. The "self-styled" social historians might be wasting their time but, provided they carried on in such well-established ways, they would probably not do much harm. However, there has been one development in the 1970s which would have confirmed his worst fears — the emergence of History Workshop. I referred to the Society for the Study of Labour History as a quasi-professional body. By that I meant that without shutting out anybody it has not tried over-hard to recruit them either. Its twice-yearly conferences have sometimes been intellectually important, but they have always been a bit of a cattle-market. (At least until the ranchers found themselves in reduced circumstances.) The society's *Bulletin* has since its first appearance in 1960 been thought of as a tool of the trade rather than as a journal. And certainly during the twenty years in which I have been co-editing it, every effort has been made to keep it as dreary as possible.[7] Now History Workshop is a protest against this sort of thing. It is a protest against what it perceives as the professionalising of labour history. It is a sound of alarm lest labour history should turn

5. R. Harrison, G. Woolven, and R. Duncan, *The Warwick Guide to British Labour Periodicals 1790-1970* (Hassocks, 1977).
6. J. Bellamy and J. Saville, eds., *Dictionary of Labour Biography*, Vol. I (1972); Vol. II (1974); Vol. III (1976); Vol. IV (1977); Vol. V (1979).
7. There was a departure from this rule in *Bulletin*, No. 37 (Autumn 1978) in which the editors described "the mystery of the missing police files". They had been sent,

into the alter ego of History-Properly-So-called. It does not want labour history to become "fat and Norman", but to be restored to the class to which it properly belongs. Whereas the Society for the Study of Labour History has a thousand members of whom 150 might attend its conferences, the workshop aims to reach many thousands and it has been astonishingly successful in doing so. Whereas the society is formally non-aligned, the workshop insists that "truth is partisan" and announces itself to be a movement of socialist historians.[8]

History Workshop began at Ruskin College, Oxford, in the late sixties, but it made little impact until the beginning of the seventies. (You must understand that Ruskin is not a full college of the University of Oxford. It has links with the University, but even closer ones with the trade union and labour movement. It teaches mature adults; trade unionists who left school at fifteen or sixteen years of age. It prepares some of them to go on to full-scale degree courses and others to return to their work-mates the better to serve them as bargainers, researchers, and leaders). As you might imagine, there have been difficulties in reconciling the claims of the university and of the movement. And History Workshop arose as a

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anonymously, photocopies of three Metropolitan police files dealing with the Hunger Marches of the 1930s. These files showed how the police spied on the Movement, how they attempted to spy on a meeting held in the precincts of the House of Commons, and how they received and accepted the help of the Canadian High Commissioner. It transpired that the originals had been stolen from the Public Record Office at just the moment when it was being considered to withdraw them and take them back to Scotland Yard. This matter was widely discussed in the press and in Parliament. Following an appeal in the *Bulletin*, the originals were returned to the PRO. Following discussions in the Cabinet, it was decided that they should be open to public inspection. A committee was established under the chairmanship of Sir Duncan Wilson to enquire into the administration of the Public Record Acts. The society's evidence to that committee is still under consideration. It throws some light upon what is said below about professionalism and anti-professionalism to record that the executive of the Society for the Study of Labour History was deeply divided as to the wisdom of publishing extracts from the missing, closed, or stolen files. Yet, it transpired that some members of the "editorial collective" of *History Workshop* had seen the files six months before copies were sent to the editors of the *Bulletin*. They were unable to find anything of historical interest in them while the legal and political significance of the whole affair was entirely lost upon them. *Hic Rhodas, hic salta!* as Karl Marx would have said.

8. R. Samuel, "Truth is Partisan", *New Statesman*, (15 February 1980). Samuel was a junior member of the Communist Party Historians Group until its virtual disintegration in 1956. Its members included Christopher Hill, Maurice Dobb, Rodney Hilton, Eric Hobsbawm, Victor Keirnan, John Saville, and Edward Thompson. Unlike their French counterparts, these scholars refused to break with Marxism. I was the only historian stupid enough to be a member of the party without being a member of the group. For its achievements, see Hobsbawm's contribution to M. Cornforth, ed., *Rebels and their Causes: Essays in Honour of A.L. Morton* (1978).

protest against the humiliations imposed upon mature working people by the conventional examination system. Instead of supplying such students with cheap and easy reading lists and childish examination papers, Raphael Samuel decided to send them straight away into *writing* history for themselves. (Samuel is Tutor in History at Ruskin and, were it not for the fact he has a deep aversion to anything that might be thought elitist, I would have described him as "the leader" of History Workshop).

Now a workshop differs from a lecture or seminar by its informality. It is a deliberate attempt to escape from the conventionality and coldness which are supposed to characterise academic occasions, for example, an occasion like this one. To this end, over-crowding and physical discomfort are encouraged since they unite us all in a better appreciation of the joys and sorrows of proletarian existence. If the person sitting next to you smells — then so much the better! Second, a workshop is a democratisation of historical practice. As like as not, the speaker will be a "first time historian" giving a paper closely related to his own industrial experience or his family's. If he is not such a "first time historian", then he will be expected to confine himself to fifteen or twenty minutes and he will find that the success or failure of the occasion will be judged, not so much by the learning or originality of what he has had to say, but rather by the number of people who joined in the discussion. Third, a workshop is partisan. It consists of socialist historians. That plainly means a repudiation of the possibility of detached or impartial history. What it means affirmatively I find it much more difficult to say. I suspect that it has something to do with welcoming, rather than resisting, the collapse of barriers which have inhibited historians from relating the past to the present. Beyond that, it points to an ill-defined fidelity to the Marxist tradition combined with a repudiation of the Leninist one.[9]

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9. In my opinion the practice of encouraging mature, adult students to try and write history before they have read much of it may well be a bold and a legitimate pedagogic device. Beyond all question, it has worked as such in many cases. The trouble is that the whole ethos of the workshop does not allow a frank acknowledgement of the fact that this is what is going on. To do so would be to re-admit "authority" which is supposed to be out of place among comrades. A failure to distinguish between different kinds of authority will be found to supply the clue to the personal identity problems of former Stalinists who subsequently move towards anarchism. The former Stalinist once accepted the syllogism which the late R. Palme Dutt offered as a present to the "genial leader of progressive mankind" upon the occasion of his seventieth birthday:

    Marxism is a science:
    Science implies mastery:
    Mastery implies a Master.

    The repentant Stalinist then comes up with a fresh, but equally invalid syllogism which runs:

    Authoritarianism implies authorities
    Teachers are authorities
    Teachers are Stalinist pigs.

    History which pertains to science and to art and is yet distinct from both of them is a very difficult subject. The adherents of History Workshop are well aware of his-

It is easy to imagine what the departed shade of the Regius Professor would have had to say about all this! He would not have been impressed by the fact that professional historians with the highest qualifications from the most ancient universities were involved, however inconspicuously, in the production of the thirteen History Workshop pamphlets which appeared between 1970 and 1974. He would have been incredulous if he had been told that all of them broke new ground, even if they were not examples of finished or well-rounded historical research. Muttering about *trahison de clercs*, he might have recalled how Marx introduced one of his brothers. (I refer not to Karl, but to Groucho). "Meet my brother, the celebrated amateur brain surgeon!"

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Before we decide just how far we should share the anxieties of the learned shade of the Regius Professor, let us briefly consider what it is that has brought about the altered state of things since his day. I suggest that there have been three main agencies at work.

Although it has been said that anybody can make history, the difficult thing is to write it. The distinction between the two is much less clear-cut than we historians, in our pride and in our modesty, have been ready to allow (I mean that some of us have been too proud to admit that we were influenced by anything contemporary and too modest to imagine that we had any influence upon anything contemporary). We were, of course, mistaken. I doubt whether the First World War would have led to the emancipation of the so-called non-historic peoples within the Hapsburg Empire had they not already started to find their historians. Similarly, I doubt whether the Second World War would have led to a new social settlement in Britain had it not been for the consciousness-raising effects of the Webbs, the Hammonds, and the Coles.

In any event, the advent of the first majority Labour government in 1945 made labour history respectable. If traditional history was pre-eminently the history of kings and queens and governments, you could not go on subjecting labour history to some form of academic apartheid after you had a *Labour* government. Even if Ralph Milliband was right and that experience between 1945 and 1950 had

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tory's affinity to religion since both are about raising the dead. But the professional historians within History Workshop betray their calling when they allow "first time historians" to imagine that attending the Durham Miners' Gala gives you a perfect chronology of the miners' history, that it gives you a better insight than reading dull and sometimes difficult books, that the whole business of the historian is with evoking past experience. It is not. It is also about identifying problems, furnishing hypotheses, and testing explanations. It is about making connections with implies a ceaseless and exacting process of learning. Fail to provide for these things and you are, at best, left with antiquarianism masquarading as history.

I am in favour of pluralism in labour history institutions. There is room for the Society for the Study of Labour History and for History Workshop. Many labour historians belong to both of them. But when it comes to matters of such importance, we really must stand up and be counted. (Whether adding a footnote to a lecture delivered in Canada is equivalent to standing up and being counted is another matter.)

more to do with government and less to do with labour than either its supporters or its adversaries imagined, this surely amounted to a new state of things.[10] If the labouring people did not govern, they were ungovernable in the old way — and between 1969 and 1979 seemingly in any way.

Some of Milliband's followers — I call them the Millibanditti — dismissed the advent of full employment, comprehensive social services, and the mixed economy as of negligible importance. But they were just being silly. The new social settlement was associated, not only with new standards of life, but a new quality of life. And this effected the preoccupations of historians whether they were engaging in teaching or research. Teachers at every level from the class room in the new comprehensive school to the seminar in the post-graduate centre found in labour history a new way of awakening interest in the past and developing the historical sense and forming the historical imagination. Researchers began to explore the possibility that the labouring majority might, in the past and not only in the present, have amounted to something. Perhaps nothing was as enclosed or as self-contained as we had imagined: neither military history, nor cultural history, nor political history, conceived of as the history of *haute politique*. The levellers' perception that no man is born with a saddle upon his back nor another born booted and spurred to ride him had been transformed from a moral to a political to an historiographical concept.

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But you have not come here to learn why the pronouncements of a Regius Professor speaking in 1925 have become out of date. And your impatience with me if I went on talking of our labour historians' artifacts, his museums and repositories, his bulletins and his biographical dictionaries, would be entirely understandable. Nor is there any reason to suppose that the tensions between the tendency to quasi-professionalism and to a committed, romantic, folksy antiquarianism should be of absorbing interest to you. What you want to know is whether any of the 3,313 books and articles to which I referred are worth having? Whether any one of them are as important as the big books of the 1960s: Raymond Williams' *Long Revolution* (1961), E.P. Thompson's *Making of the English Working Class* (1963), or Eric Hobsbawm's *Labouring Man* (1966)? The answer is: "no, there is nothing comparable." But to this one would have to add a rider: it would be as sensible to conclude that nothing happened in Britain biology in the 1860s because there appeared no single work of comparable importance to Mr. Darwin's *Origin of Species* as to suppose that the 1970s have been unrewarding years in British labour historiography. Again you might ask of these 3,313 items: is there anything important left to do? The answer is: "yes indeed".

And then you might ask: will these things be done? To that the answer is that prospects are, in many respects, dark and obscure. Before sitting down I propose to enlarge upon these somewhat cryptic answers.

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10. R. Milliband, *Parliamentary Socialism* (1961).

Some of our work in the 1970s might best be regarded as a critical enlargement of what had been accomplished by the acknowledged masters of the sixties. By way of example, let me take Eric Hobsbawm's essays on the labour aristocracy and wages and workload which were included in his *Labouring Men*. The expression "labour aristocrat" was used by workers, almost always in a perjorative sense from the late 1830s onwards.[11] It was meant to designate a relatively privileged stratum of the class which tended to be superior, aloof, and cautious. Karl Marx plainly recognised its existence, although he used the term sparingly. Frederick Engels often had recourse to it. For him it was that part of the working class which had become most thoroughly "bourgeoisified", which most clearly accepted the values of the middle class as its own: industry, thrift, chastity, sobriety, self-help, and so on. For Lenin, the labour aristocracy was linked to his theory of imperialism. Out of the super-profits of monopoly capital and the tribute derived from empire, the capitalists bought off a section of the working class. Hence opportunism, reformism, parliamentary cretinism, and all the other blemishes and deformities which prevented the working class from being its "real self" and accomplishing the social revolution.

Now Eric Hobsbawm is an avowed Marxist-Leninist, and a great historian. As historian he knew perfectly well that his concern must be with understanding what had happened in the past rather than explaining what had not happened. Whereas Lenin had failed to make clear where the frontiers of the labour aristocracy lay, what precisely were the mechanisms by which imperialism nourished a labour aristocracy, how a labour aristocracy could be recognised in England long before the arrival of Imperialism, Hobsbawm set out to characterise this stratum in a way which would be testable and analytically useful. He supplied us with its economic anatomy. He tried to show that in Victorian England some 10 to 15 per cent of the working class *regularly* received wages which were one-third to one-half greater than the average. He went on to suggest that these people were treated quite differently by the boss than was a mere labourer. They had a greater chance of upward social mobility than the "plebians". Whereas the "frontier" which separated them from these labourers or plebians was sharply drawn, that which separated them from the lower middle class was not.

The importance of this was that it supplied us with a necessary, if far from sufficient, explanation of the great change which came over the British labour

11. M.A. Shepherd, "The Origins and Incidence of the Term Labour Aristocracy", *Bulletin*, No. 39 (Autumn 1979), inaugurated an exercise in lexicographical history too rare among British, as distinct from French, social historians. Shepherd made his point against Hobsbawm & Co. by showing that their claim that the expression was a commonplace in mid-Victorian Britain was under-evidenced. But he himself failed to establish that it was more widely used in the second than in the third quarter of the nineteenth century and rather spoilt his case by a pedantry reminiscent of Bacon's Man who counted when he hit, but never counted when he missed. (Shepherd is one of my colleagues at the Centre for the Study of Social History in the University of Warwick. But it is our custom to crack one another over the head at the drop of a hat — or rather a helmet!)

movement between the second and the third quarters of the nineteenth century.[12] This stratum by virtue of its privileged position could learn the laws of the market and exploit them in its own interest by restricting the supply of its own relatively scarce kind of labour. It could create national trade unions based on the principle of high contributions and high benefits, capable of turning the screw on the boss locally through unilateral regulation while declaring itself in favour of "Defence not Defiance". Hence unions, from being schools of war, became the working man's equivalent of the public schools, fee-paying institutions which declare themselves to be at least as much about developing character as encouraging learning. The labour aristocracy was equally helpful in accounting for the transformation of the co-operative movement from one concerned with creating a New Moral World through establishing model communities to a system of scrupulous shopkeeping with the profits distributed through the "Divi" (the poor were shut out by prohibiting all credit).

Similarly, when the Polish historian, Professor Henry Katz, and I turned our attention to the history of the Reform League of the 1860s, we found evidence of the same social presence.[13] The Reform League was the heir to the Chartist tradition and like the Chartists it preserved its own identity as against the middle class national Reform Union. At the same time, it was quite prepared to accept that arch middle class radical, John Bright, as a true "Tribune of the People". It discarded four of the Charter's six points, but retained manhood suffrage and vote by ballot. In small print under manhood suffrage, it wrote "Registered and Residential". Karl Marx asked Ernest Jones what that meant. He received a very inadequate answer. What it really meant was that while pretending to go for votes for all workmen, the League knew, in its heart of hearts, that it had no intention of letting in casual labourers, "lumpen proletarians", "the roughs", "the residuum", or "the dangerous classes". These people did not stay in the same abode uninterruptedly for twelve months nor would they have taken the trouble to get themselves on to the electoral register even if they did. (As late as 1914, only 60 per cent of adult males in Britain were electors).

12. The less scrupulous opponents of the labour aristocracy thesis sometimes pretend that its adherents want the whole weight of explaining why the world of labour was so different in the second and the third quarters of the nineteenth century to depend upon the rise of the labour aristocracy. But this is not so. For example, in my *Before the Socialists* (1965), I argued that what the impoverished domestic out-workers had been to the working class in the age of the Chartists, the labour aristocracy became to the working class in the age of the Reform League. Labour aristocratic ascendancy would have been unthinkable if the working class standard of life had been falling rather than rising and without the presence of those to whom I mischievously referred as "The New Model Employers". Of course, behind these social phenomena lay the grand economic facts: "Workshop of the World" and unchallenged commercial supremacy.

13. R. Harrison, *Before the Socialists*. M. Cowling, *1867: Disraeli, Gladstone and Revolution* (Cambridge 1967), attempted a rebuttal from the standpoint of *haute politique*. The work is dedicated to the Prime Minister!

In supplying a history of the Reform League and the reform agitation, Katz and I were in the tradition of the Webbs and the Coles. We were supplementing political history with new political history. We established that in the summer of 1866 the government could not maintain order without the help of the League and that by May of the following year — thanks to rising unemployment, the return of the cholera, and the increase in the price of bread — political consciousness had reached the point at which the orders of the Reform League were being preferred to those of the government. When Disraeli said "my aim is to end the present agitation and to extinguish Gladstone and Co", the pursuit of competition between parties was being made possible by the particular conjunction which had been reached in the conflict between classes. Unlike the Chartist years, it was safe to concede, but dangerous to resist. The strange syndrome of the labour aristocracy is crucial to what was going on. It felt itself to be working class and a cut above it at the same time.

It was in making working class politics intrude upon a world which was thought to be reserved to *haute politique*; it was in refusing to ratify Trevelyan's truce that social history was history with the politics left out; it was, above all, in trying to lay bare the social foundations of politics, in depicting the labour aristocracy as something far too complex to be dismissed as a retarding force, that Katz and I imagined that we were at one with the spirit of British labour historiography in the nineteen sixties.

The 1970s has witnessed many a new contribution to the understanding of this strange syndrome of the labour aristocracy. Thus, Tholfsen has tried to locate it in terms of the way in which it worked critically through its inheritance from the Enlightment, Romanticism, and Evangelicalism.[14] Working class respectability *was* working class. Its self-help was *collective*. Friendly societies are likely to do better in an environment set by the despised values of Thrift and Industry, Chastity and Sobriety, than in one riddled with profligacy and laziness, promiscuity and drunkenness. James Hinton in the *First Shop Stewards Movement* (1972) — a work which has been under-noticed and under-valued — has shown that it was not only in its golden age that the labour aristocracy was not to be written off as everywhere and always a retarding force. In the first shop stewards movement, it was precisely the labour aristocrats, threatened by technical innovation and then by dilution through the introduction of unskilled and female labour, who raised the Red Flag.

However, the best achievement of our labour historians in the last ten years had been to explore the labour aristocracy by localities rather than nationally and by communities rather than by trades or, best of all, in the still unpublished work of Takao Matsumura in all these ways at once. (Moreover, Matsumura has wages data which is otherwise in very short supply.) The local studies by Foster on Oldham, Gray on Edinburgh, Crossick on Kentish London, and by Hopkins and Matsumura on Stourbridge help to establish the reality of labour aristocracy in new ways and within new dimensions. With varying degrees of success, these

14. T. Tholfsen, *Working Class Radicalism in Mid-Victorian England* (1976).

writers allow us to see it in the streets (socio-spatial segregation); in families (the propensity to marry within the stratum); to be strictly aristocratic (the relatively greater degree of self-recruitment from father to son to a specific trade or calling): to be secure against the terrors of the poor law; and to be able to enjoy the pleasures of belonging to a club or a friendly society, or taking part in sports or going in for gardening.[15]

However, those who insist upon the reality and usefulness of the notion of a labour aristocracy have by no means had everything their own way. To begin with, they are not agreed upon what they understand by the expression. Foster, who is attached to old Leninist modes of operation, thinks of it in terms of sub-contracting and co-exploitation while Crossick refers to it as an "elite". Those old war-horses, Professor Musson and Dr. Pelling, have been quick to anticipate these disagreements or to seize upon them. Unfortunately, their hilarious indifference to the rules of right reasoning has tended to obscure the fact that they have identified real and pressing problems.[16] There are trades and there are places in which the "labour aristocracy" simply refuses to turn up.[17] This seems to me to be much more interesting and much more important than complaining that the labour aristocracy is not a trouble-free social category or that the working classes

15. J. Foster, *Class Struggle and the Industrial Revolution* (1974); R.Q. Gray, *The Labour Aristocracy in Victorian Edinburgh* (Oxford, 1976); G. Crossick, *An Artisan Elite in Victorian Society* (1978); E. Hopkins, "Small Town Aristocrats of Labour and Their Standard of Living, 1840-1914", *Economic History Review*, 2nd. series, XXVIII (1975); T. Matsumura, "Flint Glass Makers in the Classic Age of the Labour Aristocracy, 1850-1880", (Ph.D. thesis, Universtiy of Warwick, 1976), *in publication* with Manchester University Press.

16. H. Pelling, *Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain* (1968). In the first part of his essay on the labour aristocracy, Dr. Pelling insists that the concept has no meaning while in the second he insists that the "aristocracy" has always been more politically advanced than the rest of the working class! A.E. Musson, *Trade Union and Social History* (1974) insists on the essential continuity of labour history across most of the nineteenth century. However, his heavy reliance upon the example of the printers, about whom he is a leading authority, suggests the fallacy of selected instances. (Until the introduction of the linotype and monotype at the end of the nineteenth century, printing had seen few technical innovations since the time of Caxton.) When Professor Musson refers to other trades, such as the cabinet makers and asserts that they were always confined to local trade societies and that they were uninfluenced by the "New Model", he simply gets it wrong. See D.G. Blankenhorn, "Cabinet Makers in Victorian Britain: A Study of Two Trade Unions", (M.A. thesis, University of Warwick, 1978).

17. P. Joyce, *Work, Society and Politics: the Culture of the Factory in late Victorian England*, (forthcoming Harvester Press, Brighton, 1980). In their doctoral theses on Portsmouth, Dr. D. Wilson and Dr. J. Field similarly found little trace of a "labour aristocracy". See D.R. Wilson, "Government Dockyard Workers in Portsmouth 1793-1815", (Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1975); and J. Field, "Bourgeois Portsmouth: Social Relations in a Victorial Dockyard Town, 1815-1875", (Ph.D. thesis, University of Warwick, 1979). But this is hardly surprising. If one confined attention to Portsmouth, one might conclude that a resident bourgeoisie was an unimportant phenomenon in late eighteenth or nineteenth century England! Pelling in

were related horizontally as well as vertically or that it is hard to distinguish between the labour aristocracy and the respectable working classes.[18] ("All labour", remarked Harriet Martineau, "is respectable for which there is a fair demand.") If there had not been millions of workers who aspired to labour aristocratic respectability without being able to attain to it or having attained to it, maintain it, it would be hard to understand how that "aristocracy" preserved its hegemony over the class as a whole for so long (but then this does damage Hobsbawm's point that there was a clear frontier between the "Labour Aristocrat" and the plebians). I believe that the best prospect for the continued vitality of our debate depends upon us looking at the life of the skilled artisan or craftsman before and after the golden age of the labour aristocracy. I am pleased to report that we have made a good beginning on this task thanks very largely to Dr. Prothero's life of John Gast and to the Warwick Staff Student Collective's attempt to look at why it was that some labour aristocrats were so much better able to defend their relative privileges in face of de-skilling innovations and aggressive employers than were others.[19]

It may have occurred to you that, if we are concerned to recover the labour aristocratic experience, we ought to look not only before and after, but down. Dear colleagues, we have tried to do it, but it is fiendishly difficult to recover the voices of illiterate men and women. Dr. Gareth Stedman Jones has made the best known attempt. Although his *Outcast London* (1971) is in search of the casual labourer and the sweated worker, the homeless family or the beleagured tenant

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Popular Politics and Society in Late Victorian Britain rightly points out that the miners constituted an important part of the organised or partially organised mid-Victorian working class. Yet no one would have numbered coal miners among the labour aristocracy. A response to this has been offered in R. Harrison, ed., *The Independent Collier: the coal miner as archytypal proletarian reconsidered* (Hassocks, 1978); and by A.B. Campbell, *The Lanarkshire Miners: a Social History of Their Trade Unions, 1775-1874* (Edinburgh, 1979).

18. H.F. Moorhouse, "The Marxist Theory of the Labour Aristocracy", *Social History*, (January 1978). The difficulty with this piece is not that the author acknowledges that he is no historian, but that he continually refers the reader to some ideal type of characterisation of a social formation without indicating precisely where it is to be found and without explaining how such a trouble-free category could be of any practical use to a working historian.

19. I. Prothero, *Artisans and Politics in Early Nineteenth Century London: John Gast and His Times* (1979). R. Harrison and J. Zeitlin, *Workmen of Our Class: being studies of Craftsmen at the Crossroads*, (in preparation). This book will be in the tradition of staff/student collectives as already expressed in D. Hay, P. Linebaugh, and E.P. Thompson, eds., *Albion's Fatal Tree* (1975); and *The Independent Collier*. However, it will be much more "relevant" than its predecessors in so far as it will try to throw light on how craft traditions were transmitted to assembly-line workers. Thus, the free-born Englishman and the so-called "English disease" may be shown in a new, related, and unexpected light. This does not mean that a penny more will be forthcoming to support the Centre for the Study of Social History either from the government or the Social Science Research Council. Alas! Relevance is not to be compared to Wittgenstein's rose.

who told his kids "to follow the van and don't dilly dally on the way", I imagine that he himself would allow that he has ended up by telling us more about the souls of rent collectors, charity organisers, and middle class social investigators than about those who dwelt in the lower depths. When we have learned how Authority distinguished between a "Vagrant" and a "Necessitous Wayfarer", how little further on we are to coming to make the distinction truly or for ourselves. We must play opticians to these "bourgeois" and devise lenses which will correct their faulty vision. But how, pray, shall we know when we have been successful? And remember that our Victorian magistrates, school attendance officers, and poor law guardians at Houndsditch, were, despite themselves, not quite as intrusive nor half as particular as Le Roy Ladurie's inquisitors at Carcassonne.

Nor could oral history have delivered Gareth Stedman Jones from his difficulties. Of course the techniques of oral history are of great importance to labour historians. The latest example in *History Workshop* journal was an essay which is of absorbing interest for the study of the lumpen proletariat between the wars.[20] But that is it! It reaches only a little way back. Besides, its best evidence is very rarely as reliable as the best sort of documentary evidence.

Now I know perfectly well that Regius Professors and readers of the *News of the World* share a superstitious reference for the written word — provided that, in the one case, that the word has *not* been published and, in the other, that it has.[21] But that is quite beside the point. My argument is that *most* oral evidence is deliberately solicited and that it therefore has much the same worth as memoirs or autobiography. Conversely, at least *some* documentary evidence is unsolicited. It was secreted unselfconsciously in the course of practical life and was not therefore designed to impress historians or sociologists or to secure their approval. Therefore, the Nixon tapes or the recordings of the "buggers" of Tinkerbell[21] constitute a rare and an unusual form of oral evidence. I do wish that those who engage in the useful and vital work of oral history would not try to dismiss such considerations. I do wish that they would remember how Bazarov in Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* was mocked and deceived by a peasant when he asked him whether the earth rested upon the back of a turtle. ("Oh yes, little Father we all know that." And then, when Bazarov had gone — the aside: "These gentry have too little to do. They live by their tongues rather than by their hands. The best way of seeing them off is to tell them what they want to hear.")

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Given the time I could try and do for Edward Thompson what I have tried to do for Eric Hobsbawm and introduce you to some of the contesting forces which have grown out of his contribution to our historiography. But it would take me

20. J. White, "Campbell Bunk: A Lumpen Community in London Between the Wars", *History Workshop*, No. 8 (1979).

21. This refers, not to sexual perversion among the faeries, but to the policemen who are alleged to "tap", or "bug", our telephone from an office in London known, irreverently, as "Tinkerbell".

only a little way into those 3,313 items.[22] I prefer the more radical and the more critical course of complaining about what I cannot find.

I cannot find an adequate history of the labour press. The preliminary work for this great undertaking has been done. Ironically, the brief heroic period of the unstamped or pauper press has been done — and well done — twice. But worthy histories of key labour journals remain a rarity. For twenty years I have been crying out for a history of this key institution as the way into a new history of the class which would not be a merely institutional one.[23]

I cannot find a history of the law relating to trade unions. As with the press, the bibliographical preparations have been completed and there have been one or two fine, partial, and preliminary offerings, but no more. We are left with *A Legal History of Trade Unionism* published half a century ago and written from a narrowly legal standpoint.[24] The reader will consult it in vain who wants to know why the law relating to trade unions should have been so eminently reversible, why crises in the legal status of trade unions should have served as forcing houses for new departures in attitudes and in institutional life, and how the law and the courts may or may not exercise a strange symbolic significance. (We are still plagued by positivists and quantifiers who imagine that the importance of a law can be measured by counting the number of persons prosecuted under its provisions.)

The history of female labour has yet to find its historian: someone who will not be enticed into repeating the mistakes of early labour history and going for the approved and heroic minority at the expense of the silent exploited and oppressed majority.[25]

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22. E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (1963) is universally acknowledged to have been the biggest event in British labour historiography since 1945. One of Thompson's major insights was into the relationship between the values of the "plebians" which were shaped before the Industrial Revolution and the behaviour of the proletariat during and after it. Within the last few months, two books have appeared which both make, in very different ways, some contribution to an understanding of what is involved here: R.A. Leeson, *Travelling Brothers* (1979); and C.R. Dobson, *Masters and Journeymen* (1980), which looks at nearly four hundred eighteenth-century labour disputes.
23. *The Warwick Guide to British Labour Periodicals*. But the most professional bibliographical contribution has come from J. Weiner, *A Descriptive Finding List of Unstamped British Labour Periodicals, 1830-1836*. (Weiner and P. Hollis duplicated each other's work on the "Unstamped" or "Pauper Press".) J. Epstein's study of the *Northern Star* [*International Review of Social History*, Amsterdam, XXI, Part 7 (1976)] supplies a fine example of how to write about labour newspapers. S. Harrison, *Poor Men's Guardians* (1974) is the latest popular account.
24. R.Y. Hedges and A. Winterbottom, *A Legal History of Trade Unionism* (1930). B.A. Hepple, J.M. Neeson, and Paul O'Higgins, *A Bibliography of the Literature on British and Irish Labour Law* (1975).
25. On reflection this seems less than just to S. Rowbotham, *Hidden From History* and to the numerous writings by L. Davindorf on domestic servants and other important themes in women's labour history.

Then comparative labour history still has an immense career of usefulness before it, both at the macro and at the micro level.[26]

Finally, looking at the 3,313, one notices books promised, but missing. The second volume of Clegg, Fox, and Thompson's *History of Trade Unionism since 1889*, for example. (What a back-handed tribute to the resilience of the Webbs that is.) But then where is my own long over-due life and times of Sidney and Beatrice? Where? Where?

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Talking of the Webbs reminds me that before the First World War Sidney gave evidence to a Royal Commission on the Universities. Lord Milner said to him: "I thought that the Idea of the State and the Idea of the University were wholly incompatible." To which Webb replied: "I don't think it will be helpful for us to consider either the Idea of the University or the Idea of the State. Here are the facts. . . ."

Alas! The time for such Fabian evasions appears to have passed. But here, dear colleagues, are "the facts". Look if you will at this table, which has been kindly supplied to me by Sir Hans Kornberg, Professor of Biochemistry in the University of Cambridge. Sir Hans obtained the data incorporated in the table from a senior educational administrator.

Table 1. ***Government-financed Research and Development expenditure (In EUA) per head of population in 1977***

	FRG	France	Netherlands	Belgium	UK
Total	78.7	66.5	65.1	51.3	45.4
For:					
Protection and improvement of human health	4.0	3.6	4.9	3.5	1.3
Agricultural productivity and technology	1.6	2.7	4.8	2.7	1.9
General promotion of knowledge	37.2	16.9	35.4	22.0	11-14
Defence	9.8	22.0	2.0	0.2	22.6

26. The British Society for the Study of Labour History, in conjunction with the Australian and Canadian Societies, intends to convene a Conference in Comparative Commonwealth Labour History at the Centre for the Study of Social History in Warwick in September 1981. It is hoped and expected that the Scottish, Irish, Welsh, and South African Labour History Societies will participate. The concentration upon the lands of white settlement is preliminary and done for comparative purposes only. Indians, Tanzanians, Japanese, and citizens of the United States have already expressed interest and all of them will be made most welcome.

Please notice that the figures properly allow for differences in population and in national income and are calculated in European Units of Account. Please notice, too, that they relate to a period *before* the advent of Mrs. Thatcher's administration. Mrs. Thatcher has undertaken to raise expenditure on defence by 3 per cent in real terms while cutting the budget of the Social Science Research Council by 25 per cent. Last Friday night in London, I compared notes with labour historians from all over the country. We arrived at the conclusion that we had suffered cuts of between 70 and 80 per cent. Courses are closing. Entire scholarly communities are at risk. I rejoice in this brilliant confirmation of my thesis that between the fortunes of *Labour* and the fortunes of *Labour History* there is — whether it be thought to be apt or unseemly — a correspondence. For the rest, you might as well confuse the battle field at Hastings with the Heights of Abraham as conclude that, because I am a trifle over-weight, I am grown "fat and Norman". But, despite the fear that there are members of our research councils who are too anxious to anticipate the wishes of the government, one may still be optimistic. Some of the achievements I have been describing are irreversible. The fame of British labour historiography abroad, its popularity at home, and its profound relevance to the crisis of contemporary British society all point to the surmounting of present difficulties.